

Prayer

Praise You Lord Jesus Christ, for the incredible journey of faith upon which You have led Your people the Church, over two thousand years. May we who bear the Good News of Salvation in this generation confess our debt to those who have gone before, and prove worthy of our call to preach the Word to all people both in season and out of season: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Pastors

Pray today for any pastors you know who also preach in church on Sundays. They bear an onerous responsibility to speak prophetically to the people for whom they care.

On-going prayers

- *Praise God for the joys of family life and the bonds of love*
- *Pray for all who suffer bullying or stress in the workplace*
- *Pray for Zimbabwe*

Meditation

When I feel like letting go, Lord Jesus, hold me close;
and when I want to run away, then stay with me, dear Lord.

When I know that I am lost, Lord Jesus, rescue me;
and when I lose direction, then be my compass, dear Lord.

When I see there's trouble ahead, Lord Jesus, clear my mind;
and when I feel the threat of fear, then soothe my soul, dear Lord.

When I hear the call to action, Lord Jesus, make me ready;
and when I stumble on the way, then lift my spirit, dear Lord

When I sense the time is right, Lord Jesus, lead me onwards;
and when I open my lips to speak, then fill my mouth dear Lord.

When I'm sure I'm on the right track, Lord Jesus, keep me whole;
and when I grasp the call of God, then fill my life, dear Lord.

Bible Study - Peter 1:22-25

²² *Now you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth for the sake of genuine mutual love, earnestly love one another from a pure heart; ²³ you who have been born again, not of mortal but immortal descent, through the living and abiding Word of God. ²⁴ This is because:*

'All humanity is like grass, and its entire glory is like the flower of grass; the grass withers and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the Word of the Lord abides forever.'

And this Word is the Gospel which was preached to you.

Review

It is so easy to read this wonderful text and appreciate much of its great power, and yet miss out on the full meaning of what Peter said. There is no doubt whatsoever that these words contain important and wholesome advice for Christians, largely to do with what it means to love one another in obedience to Christ's will for us (1:22), to accept for oneself

the amazing truth of new birth into immortality (1:23), to be touched by the 'abiding' Word of God (1:23), to compare what God has given us with the temporary and fading glories of this world (1:24) and to dwell on the truth of the Gospel (1:25). All of this is worthy of our fullest attention and whatever time we may give to study it; but we will miss out on some of its deepest truths if we fail to see how and why Peter spoke and wrote in this way.

One clue to the setting of these words comes at the beginning of each of verse 22 and 23, which I paraphrase in this way; 'now you have purified your souls ...you who have been born again ...'. This is an accurate translation of the Greek, and it gives us the impression that Peter was speaking in an impassioned manner directly to a group of people just after they had been baptised! Once you see the possibilities of this, then the words of the text jump into life! Unfortunately, many translations avoid any such implications and offer a text which is relatively flat; for example; 'Since you have purified yourselves ... and since you have been born anew ...' Such versions still leave us with a good and fascinating text to study, but the phrases do not connect together with as much logic, power and passion as with the theory that they have been spoken just after the act of baptism.

Earlier in our studies we noticed the possibility that 1 Peter 1:3 to 4:11 was a sermon, and now we have a fuller picture. This sermon was addressed initially to candidates for baptism to give them encouragement in the faith (1:3-9), and advice about starting the Christian path of life (1:10-12). Then Peter appealed to them to prepare for baptism by separating themselves from the world (1:13-16), and invoked the name of God the Father and the saving work of Jesus Christ (1:17-21). It is reckoned by many that at this point (between verses 21 and 22) the candidates were baptised, and the passage we have read today was the first thing said to those who had just been baptised! If you imagine a baptismal service for adults who have been converted and all that this means for those involved, you can almost feel the joy and anticipation amongst those hearing these words, and this is how we should receive them!

Peter's first point was those who had been baptised had acted in obedience. For Peter, obedience was very close to faith, and one who had faith in Jesus Christ as Lord had a duty to be obedient to what Jesus said. Peter of course, was referring to the great command given him personally by the risen Christ; 'Go therefore into all the nations ... baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ...' In addition, Peter did not think of this as merely an initiation rite, but something which indicated 'new birth' (1:23) and the subsequent change of character, which enabled a Christian to make the great leap from living according to best worldly standards of 'genuine mutual love' (Greek 'philadelphia') to the higher call of Christ which was to 'love one another' with a quality of faithful love (Greek 'agape') from God alone. Such a transformation, said Peter, was brought about by the 'living and abiding Word of God' (1:23), and he illustrates the difference between the permanence of the new spiritual life and the fragility of the old life now left behind by quoting from a famous prophecy of Isaiah (40:6-8).

Going Deeper

There is a real sense of excitement and anticipation within this passage, and with this understanding of the possible background to what was said, we can be immeasurably blessed as we study the details of the words he used. Each verse contains awesome truths of Christian Faith, and the quote from Isaiah comes to life when we look carefully at what it says and connect the 'Word of the Lord' from the Old Testament to the 'Word of the Lord' in the New.

Notes on the text and translation

V22 *There are two Greek words for love used in this verse. Firstly 'philadelphia' which I have translated 'mutual love' because it refers to natural affection between brothers and sisters. Secondly the word 'agape' which I have translated 'love' as in 'love one another ...'. This is the stronger category of love which carries with it a sense of*

faithfulness and intent which is unique to the New Testament. See study for further details.

- V23 *The word 'descent' (Greek 'spora') is sometimes translated 'seed'. It refers to a person's lineage, using the ancient imagery of male 'sperm' or 'seed' by which a child is conceived. We often miss out on the full meaning of this because of modern sensibilities about sex and male descent, but if we allow ourselves to accept the full meaning of this word used frequently and unashamedly in scriptures, then it enriches our understanding of both baptism and our being 'sons of God'.*
- V23 *The word 'abide' (Greek verb 'meno') combines the idea of permanence, dwelling and endurance. There is no other word in English which captures this combination, so although it is a relatively old word, it is unwise not to use it because the alternatives are inadequate.*
- V24 *This is a famous text which many people know well, but not entirely accurately. The truth is that the Greek does not say 'the flower of the field', it says 'the flower of grass', meaning quite literally the grass flower which releases pollen (like any flower). Consequently, the words 'the grass withers and the flower falls' describe the natural process of the dying off of grass in the autumn of a hot country such as Israel.*
- V25 *I have retained the old word 'abide' in verse 25 for the same reason as above for v23. If alternative English words are used, we miss out on too much of its meaning.*
- V25 *The 'Gospel which was preached to you' is one verb in Greek; 'euangelidzo'. Quite literally, it means 'the declaring of thanks', but in the New Testament it retains the specialist meaning of the preaching of the Gospel.*

Obedience, faith and love (1:22)

The phrase which greets us at the beginning of this passage is this; 'now you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth ...' No sentence could better describe the state of one who has just been baptised! The Greek verb 'now you have purified' means that a deed has been done which has continuing effects, and the word 'soul' means 'a whole person' not just some part or aspect of a person's identity. All this fits well with what we know about baptism from the New Testament. It is not something which has power in itself, and we are certainly not saved because we are baptised, but neither is it a mere symbol of our salvation for there are many symbols of faith which can remind us of what Christ has done for us (including the Communion, or the 'Lord's Supper' for example). However, once we have submitted in obedience and faith to baptism, life can never be the same again. Baptism is by its nature a public statement made by an individual which is blessed by God and therefore changes the purpose and direction of that person's life. God of course has saved us in Christ before we even knew it, but in baptism we make our public statement of faith, declaring that we believe the Gospel we have heard to be the truth.

Truth is a difficult word to use today, because many people regard it as a philosophical concept or an intellectual entity. Here in Peter's letter, it simply stands for the truth of the Gospel, which, because it comes from God the Creator of the World, must by definition be true in every sense of the word. This, of course, is still the same today, but people find it hard to think of truth like this because they are locked in to the world's way of thinking.

The immediate consequence of baptism is that we are led into a new quality of love, and this is the love of Jesus Christ, expressed by the New Testament word 'agape' and found in the phrase 'love one another'. This quality of love is marked by the two main characteristics of the love of God found in the Old Testament; faithful love (God's 'Covenant' love) which never fails and always persists, and the undeserved love of God expressed in His blessing and favour, often described in the New Testament as 'grace'. So one who is baptised is empowered by God to live up to a higher and more demanding

quality of love for others which is not merely 'genuine mutual love', however noble and righteous this may be from a human point of view, but love which is infused with the eternal characteristics of God, which are faithfulness and grace. This is the 'agape' Jesus calls us to when He says 'love one another' (John 13:34f. 15:2f.) and what Paul means when he speaks of love (Romans 12:10, 2 Cor 13:10 etc.). Here, Peter reminds us that it is not a form of love we can express except by the presence of God within us by 'new birth' and through baptism, the route God has ordained by which we attain it.

Born again, immortal! (1:23,24)

It is hardly surprising that Peter refers again to the famous conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus when talking to those who have just been baptised. Many a preacher at a baptism service has preached from John 3:3 or John 3:16. Peter has already spoken about the 'new birth' of one who receives Christ (1:3), and it is clear that the Gospel he preached centred on the new birth we have in Christ Jesus. In our passage, he explains it in a way which is very similar to Jesus' explanation in John 3, saying that the new birth is not a new physical birth but a spiritual, or 'immortal' one. The idea is not that physical birth is somehow downplayed or cast aside so that we can have another birth into the things of God, but that once born physically, we all need a spiritual 'new birth' into the immortal things of God.

As I explained in the notes above for verse 23, the word often used in this passage and elsewhere in scripture is 'seed', meaning inheritance or descent. However, Peter's words contain the strong suggestion that just as Jesus was conceived spiritually in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, so our 'new birth' as spiritual beings is in the same immortal lineage of Jesus, by means of the Holy Spirit, of God Himself. Jesus' work of salvation has made this new birth possible; as Peter says, it happens 'through the living and abiding Word of God' (1:23)

Peter uses a quote from Isaiah 40:6-8 in order to make his point, and I have described some of the details of the illustration in the notes above. Isaiah saw the truth that all history and human experience is 'like the flower of grass'. In different parts of the world our mental picture of grass is different because of the climate in which we live. In the Middle East, grass grows and flowers in the summer just as it does anywhere in the world, but its life-span is short because of the hot winds which dry it up and release and spread its pollen and seed. Certainly, grass continues to grow, year on year, but it was only green and growing for a short period. By comparison, the 'Word of the Lord' was everlasting

The 'Word of the Lord' (1:24,25)

When Peter said 'the Word of the Lord abides for ever' (1:23), it was the second time he used the Greek word 'meno' in this passage (see also 1:23), and each time he used it to describe God's Word. What does Peter mean by the 'Word of the Lord'? It is unlikely that Peter meant the Bible, meaning the Old Testament of his own day (because the New Testament had not yet been formed and compiled). Given that so many links have been made with the Gospel of John, and the fact that Peter and John were very close when following Jesus, it is most likely that Peter used this expression to refer to Jesus in His exalted form. The risen Jesus was the 'Word of God', living and permanently dwelling amongst those who receive Him.

You could say that the metaphors have become all mixed up at this point, but that's how it should be, and Peter shows no concern at the overlapping layers of illustration he gives. He was preaching a sermon of inspiration to converts, and one which the Holy Spirit would use both in them and now in us, to inspire our faith and our spirits. Jesus is the immortal Word of God, people are like mortal 'grass', but when people accept Jesus then the immortal replaces the mortal in them, and the 'Word of God' becomes life within which is never ending and enables God's people to love each other with the highest qualities of

love. However you express this, it is the same Gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ and by means of the Holy Spirit

Application

I am one who was baptised as an infant, but who consciously confirmed my baptismal promises as an adult, and both events, though I can only remember the second, are deeply meaningful to me. It is very important that the church maintains its commitment to baptism as the way God has ordained for us to express our faith publicly. Despite the many divisions within the church, it is still true that most churches accept the baptism practiced by others, and if they do not, then they ought to, because just as there is one God, there is One Lord Jesus Christ and One Baptism into His death and resurrection which affirms our faith. Protect and honour the practice of baptism with your church because as you read scripture you will find that it frequently talks about the spiritual issues of life and death which lie at the heart of baptism; whether washing away the impurities of the old life, coming through death to life, being 'born again' to the immortality of the soul, all of these Gospel truths are expressed within baptism.

Our scripture today has energy, vitality, enthusiasm and godly power to inspire, direct, instruct and motivate those who are baptised to celebrate their faith with vigour and optimism. What can possibly overcome us if we have been saved by Christ and live with the assurance of immortality? Death has lost its power, and life may be lived for the glory of God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does this passage of scripture help you understand your own baptism? If so, how?
2. What is truth? In the light of this study, see if you can answer this famous question posed by Pilate (John 18:38)
3. Discuss what you mean by the phrase the 'Word of God', and what does this phrase say about Jesus?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

As one who is a preacher myself, I can almost hear the preacher coming out in Peter's words here! Yet these words seem to have a power which rises above the setting for which they were originally planned, and they raise the spirits of those of us who read them so many years later. I find these words to be a real inspiration for study and prayer.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read through the quote in verse 24 and 25 from Isaiah. Learn this and recall it from time to time during your day or during the week ahead. You will find that this verse will speak to you more and more as you use it.*
- *Try to find out what your church's policy is on baptism. Measure it against what is said here in this text and what other great passages of scripture say about baptism (e.g. Romans 6) say.*

Final Prayer

When our time comes to stand up and do Your will, may we not be found wanting. Give us courage, Lord God, when we hear Your voice, to act; and when we sense Your call, to follow. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN